



Red Flag Lessons

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AIRCREWS GAIN VALUABLE EXPERIENCE

The Red Flag Exercise should have been a great memory. Flying an F-16CG with and against world-class pilots on world-class ranges in a very challenging scenario were all Red Flag standards. But this time, launching with me as part of the Blue Forces SEAD would be my brother-in-law, Mike, in an F-16CJ. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a Red Flag that I'll never forget, even though I've tried.

On my final mission of the Flag, a single Aggressor managed to leak through our Marine F-18 escort. When it became clear that the Aggressor was also slipping past the CJs, the next line of counter air defense, Mike turned his element toward the threat. Then due to some breakdowns in situational awareness and communications, Blue GCI responded "hostile" to a declaration request by one of the members of my four-ship.

Had I been on top of my game, I could have sorted out that the position call for the hostile declaration was actually Mike's flight had turned hot and tried to stop my wingman from shooting. But I didn't. Mike was "dead." Talk about fratricide. Imagine if the shots taken had been real, and me having to explain to my sister and her kids about what happened on that day. But this mission wasn't the only one that I remember from that Red Flag.

During the first week, I was given the opportunity on one sortie to drop live LGBs for the first time in my career. But due to multiple air-to-ground threat reactions prior to the Initial Point (IP) and then an air-to-air threat reaction over the target area, we were forced to go to our backup Time On Target (TOT). Then as a result of a switch error, I went through dry on the re-attack. By then, because our target was in the far northwest corner of the Nellis ranges near Tonapah, we were out of gas and had to return to base. Bringing live bombs back to base and landing out of a straight-in is not a story worth telling at the club. Explaining to a disappointed ...



Photo by MSgt Dave Ahlswede

crew chief about why you didn't put bombs-on-target is not much fun either. But even this mission wasn't the most memorable of that Red Flag. A couple days later, we were given another chance to drop live — this time we had general purpose bombs from a low altitude attack. I had years of experience in basic bomb dropping, so I felt confident about the mission and was determined to not bring my bombs back for a straight-in again. And I didn't, but as it turned out this wasn't something to be very proud of.

On this mission we were to follow a four-ship of Portuguese F-16s on the southern ingress route, bend south to terrain mask behind Kawich, and then turn west for the attack on a row of vehicles. The Portuguese were supposed to follow a route south of our IP run, but due to air-to-air threat reactions, all of us went off the black line near the Farms. We lost track of the Portuguese until we turned south near Kawich, when we spotted some very low altitude F-16s crossing our flight path about 5 miles behind us. "Who is that?" I wondered (something often thought at Red Flag), and I decided to push it up (another common choice over the Nevada desert). But the Portuguese didn't go away.

When they flew off the black line, the Portuguese could no longer get back on course and make their backup TOT. So, instead, they decided to cut the corner and fly direct to their target. Bad decision. They had not done sufficient flight planning and/or briefing to realize that taking this shortcut would put them directly over my flight's live target area right in the middle of our backup TOT window. Fortunately my #3 was on top of his game that day and when my element popped for the attack, he

spotted the extra F-16s headed for the target and called for a terminate. So we went through dry and headed back to the IP for a re-attack. But as a result of another air-to-air threat reaction, we were now past our final TOT window.

I grumbled to myself, "another miss to report to all of our buddies in the de-brief." At least we had a plan for how to get rid of our bombs. And we had just enough gas left to make it happen. The dump target game plan was to move west of the target area and hold until the "war" was over. Then with clearance from range control we would do a hot pass on our target from the west, rather than from the east as originally planned. So that's what we did, at least that's what the other three members of my flight did.

My problem was that we had thoroughly studied and briefed the attack from the east, but not the west. The visual references I'd practically memorized were no longer of any use. And so when I popped on the green stuff for the dump attack, I misidentified the row of vehicles and rolled in on some others that were about a half a mile west of our planned target. This put me inside the Minimum Attack Perimeter (MAP) and steep in my delivery. Not realizing my mistake, I tried to compensate by pulling the pipper up to the target and pickling. As it turned out, I was only slightly steep and slightly below minimum altitude, but still it was a gross error for lots of reasons. Fortunately for me and for anyone on the ground, it was not a fatal one.

So what went wrong on this Red Flag. Lots of things, many of which were out of my control. Still, I was really bummed out by all the problems, especially about the mis-

takes I had made. I was fortunate that nothing worse happened and that I could take home with me the following lessons learned:

Expect unpredictable stuff to happen. It almost always does, so why not plan for it as much as possible and be mentally prepared and not frustrated when it does.

Being experienced doesn't necessarily mean you are as proficient as you wish. In my case, I had recently re-qualified in the jet and upgraded to flight lead after years behind a desk. Lots of experience means very little if you have been out of the jet for a while.

Don't let pride cloud your thinking. Bringing back my bombs for a second time would have been better than potentially fragging myself like I did.

Flight leaders must never lose track of their priorities and never drop their guard. When my wingman and I returned to base with our live bombs, it was to a very non-standard straight-in recovery to the north at Nellis due to the

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winds. Number 2 was low on fuel, so I sent him in first. The radios were chaos — Red Flag standard. His brain was scrambled. I could imagine, because my head was spinning, too. When he failed to call gear down on short final, I looked forward to see that he still hadn't put his gear down yet. A

quick call on the VHF radio sorted this out and earned a big thanks from #2 on the ground. I guess not all the memories were bad from that Red Flag from hell.

And finally, **Don't shoot your sister's husband even if it's not on purpose.** ▶

Photo by SSgt Cherie A. Thurlby

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